



ARCHITECTURE, MEMORY AND INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY: THE ROLE OF THE 1963, 1999, 2019 COMPETITIONS SHAPED THE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN

MİMARLIK, BELLEK VE KURUMSAL KİMLİK BAĞLAMINDA BERLİN DEVLET KÜTÜPHANESİ'Nİ ŞEKİLLENDİREN 1963, 1999 VE 2019 YARIŞMALARI

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Abstract

This paper examines how architectural competitions contribute to the formation and transformation of institutional identity through the case of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. While previous studies have primarily focused on the library's architectural history or political symbolism, the role of architectural competitions as instruments shaping institutional identity remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the study analyzes three key architectural competitions held in 1963, 1999, and 2019, corresponding to three critical political periods in Berlin's history: the Cold War, the post-reunification era, and the contemporary globalized city. The research adopts a qualitative, comparative, and document-based methodology, combining historical contextual analysis, architectural analysis, and discourse analysis. Through this framework, the study investigates how each competition articulated political agendas, translated them into architectural strategies, and contributed to the institution's symbolic representation. The study argues that architectural competitions function not merely as design selection mechanisms but as cultural and political instruments through which institutional identities are constructed, negotiated, and redefined. In the case of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, the competitions reflect an evolution from ideological representation during the Cold War to processes of cultural reconciliation after reunification and, more recently, to architectural stewardship in the context of heritage preservation and modernization. The study therefore contributes to the broader understanding of architectural competitions as mechanisms through which architecture mediates between memory, politics, and institutional identity in transforming urban contexts.

Keywords: Stabi, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Architectural Competition, Cultural Transformation, Berlin Reunification.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Berlin Devlet Kütüphanesi (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin) örneği üzerinden mimari yarışmaların kurumsal kimliğin oluşumu ve dönüşümüne nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu incelemektedir. Mevcut çalışmalar çoğunlukla kütüphanenin mimarlık tarihi ya da politik sembolizmi üzerine odaklanmış olsa da, mimari yarışmaların kurumsal kimliği şekillendiren araçlar olarak oynadığı rol büyük ölçüde yeterince incelenmemiştir. Bu araştırma boşluğunu ele alan çalışma, Berlin'in tarihindeki üç kritik politik döneme karşılık gelen 1963, 1999 ve 2019 yıllarında gerçekleştirilen üç önemli mimari yarışmayı analiz etmektedir: Soğuk Savaş dönemi, yeniden birleşme sonrası dönem ve günümüzün küreselleşmiş kenti bağlamı. Araştırma, tarihsel bağlamsal analiz, mimari analiz ve söylem analizini bir araya getiren nitel, karşılaştırmalı ve belge temelli bir metodoloji benimsemektedir. Bu çerçevede çalışmada, her bir yarışmanın politik gündemleri nasıl ifade ettiğini, bu gündemleri mimari stratejilere nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ve kurumun sembolik temsilinin oluşumuna nasıl katkıda bulunduğunu incelemektedir. Bu çalışma, mimari yarışmaların yalnızca tasarım seçim süreçleri olarak değil, aynı zamanda kurumsal kimliklerin inşa edildiği, müzakere edildiği ve yeniden tanımlandığı kültürel ve politik araçlar olarak işlediğini ileri sürmektedir. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin örneğinde, söz konusu yarışmalar Soğuk Savaş dönemindeki ideolojik temsilden, yeniden birleşme sonrasında kültürel uzlaşma süreçlerine ve daha yakın dönemde mirasın korunması ve modernizasyon bağlamında mimari koruyuculuk anlayışına doğru bir evrimi yansıtılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, mimari yarışmaların dönüşen kentsel bağlamlarda mimarlığın bellek, politika ve kurumsal kimlik arasında nasıl bir aracı rol üstlendiğini anlamaya yönelik daha geniş literatüre katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stabi, Berlin Devlet Kütüphanesi, Mimari Yarışma, Kültürel Dönüşüm, Berlin'in Yeniden Birleşmesi.

INTRODUCTION

The question of what it means to be the national library in a divided city, and how this becomes significant within the newly reunited city in which this library is found, is far more complex than a purely architectural issue. When considering Berlin, where political division, ideological struggles, and continuous transformation have shaped the city, this becomes an especially complex question. In this regard, the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, or “Stabi,” which consists of Haus Unter den Linden in (East) Berlin and Haus Potsdamer Straße in West Berlin, is one such institution through which this complexity can be examined.

Architectural competitions have long been essential to the urban development process in Berlin (Eris, 2016; Eris & Ozer, 2016, 2021). The periods of discontinuity, whether war, division, administrative change, reunification, and sociopolitical transformation, have left distinct marks on architectural decision-making processes. Architectural competitions were more than mechanisms for selecting building designs; they also reflected transformations in political agendas, cultural demands, and societal values, revealing how each period sought to inscribe its identity into architecture. In this city, where transformation is continuous, architectural competitions have functioned as instruments through which both the material and symbolic dimensions of the city were defined.

Although a growing body of literature has examined the architectural history of the Staatsbibliothek and the political symbolism of Berlin’s cultural institutions, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of architectural competitions as mechanisms shaping institutional identity. Existing studies tend to focus either on the buildings’ architectural qualities or on the broader political narratives of the divided and reunited city. However, the competitive procedures through which these architectural transformations were realized have largely remained unexplored as analytical frameworks for understanding institutional identity formation.

Stabi exists within this complex network of political, cultural, and architectural processes. The institution, greatly altered by various competitions, is also part of the urban memory of Berlin as “Stabi,” a nickname that reflects local linguistic usage and cultural familiarity. The dual identity of the institution during the period of the divided city allowed the library to emerge as a significant point of recognition, both architecturally and symbolically.

Against this background, the present study aims to examine how architectural competitions functioned as instruments through which the institutional identity of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin was constructed, negotiated, and transformed across different historical periods. By focusing on the competitions held in 1963, 1999, and 2019, the study investigates how architectural design processes interacted with political contexts, cultural narratives, and urban transformation in Berlin.

Building upon this perspective, the study examines how Stabi has been represented at the intersection of politics, architecture, and symbolism. Architectural competitions and the culture of competition have played a decisive role in transforming the library site, which was once defined and contested by ideological conflict, into a contemporary institution associated with cultural continuity and shared urban memory. In this context, the three architectural competitions are analyzed through three analytical axes—political context, architectural strategy, and symbolism—allowing for a comparative understanding of how each competition expressed, reinforced, or challenged the evolving institutional identity of Stabi.

The core research focus revolves around three architectural competition events, occurring in 1963, 1999, and 2019, and examines how they contributed to the structural and institutional development of the Staatsbibliothek. These competitions occurred during different historical periods: the Cold War era, the reconstruction period following German reunification, and the contemporary period characterized by globalization and the broader implications of digitalization. Since then, the Staatsbibliothek has continued to evolve and adapt to changing political, social, and technological environments. Within the scope of this study, the central question concerns how these three competitions shaped the material, symbolic, and institutional identity of the Staatsbibliothek—and, by extension, Berlin’s urban narrative.

To address this question, it is essential to consider competition not merely as a procedural mechanism. Instead, competition is understood as an instrument through which political agendas and institutional identities are articulated.

Through this comparative perspective, the study demonstrates how the transformation of the Staatsbibliothek from an emblem of a divided city into a central cultural institution of a reunited Berlin has been shaped through successive architectural competitions. In this sense, the library becomes more than a repository of knowledge; it emerges as a spatial and symbolic arena through which the city continuously negotiates the relationship between its historical past and its evolving urban identity.

In this respect, the study contributes to the literature by positioning architectural competitions not merely as technical design selection processes, but as cultural and political instruments through which institutional identities are articulated and renegotiated. By bringing together architectural analysis, historical contextualization, and discourse analysis, the research offers a comparative perspective on how architecture participates in the construction of institutional memory within a city marked by political division and subsequent reunification.

In light of this, the research is guided by the following research questions:

In what ways did the architecture competitions carried out in 1963, 1999, and 2019 influence the political, spatial, and symbolic identity of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin in various periods of history?

How did the various competitions serve as tools of institutional identity formation within the ideological environments of the Cold War, reunification, and the digital age?

In what ways are the two library buildings, Haus Unter den Linden and Haus Potsdamer Straße, reflecting the above transformations through architecture and cultural stories?

Collectively, these questions serve as the basis for analysis in evaluating the competitions as more than simply design processes, but as cultural phenomena whereby the Staatsbibliothek's meaning, identity, and role were continually negotiated. To situate these questions within their broader spatial and historical context, the geographical and political division of Berlin during the Cold War is illustrated in Figure 1, which indicates the locations of the two library buildings in the formerly divided city.

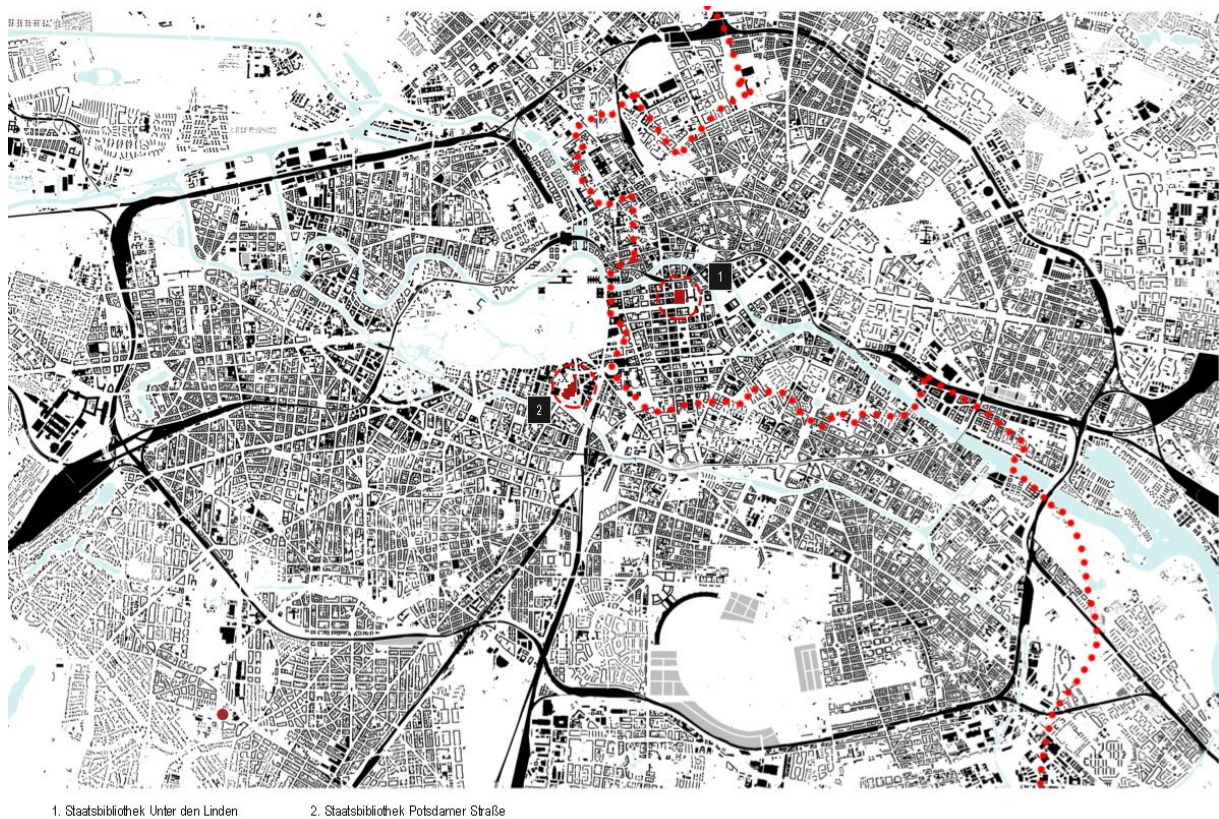


Figure 1. Map of divided Berlin showing the locations of Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Unter den Linden (East) and Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Potsdamer Straße (West).

METHODOLOGY

The research uses a qualitative, comparative, and document-based methodology to explore the impact of three architectural competitions in 1963, 1999, and 2019 on the political, spatial, and symbolic identity of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. This methodological framework allows the competitions to be examined not only as architectural design processes but also as historically situated cultural and political instruments. This approach enables the competitions to be analyzed not only in terms of architectural practices, but also as cultural instruments operating within broader sociopolitical change.

Historical Contextual Analysis

This phase reconstructs the historical, political, and institutional conditions surrounding each competition through a descriptive–analytical contextualization, enabling the identification of the broader sociopolitical forces that shaped architectural decision-making. The analysis draws on both primary and secondary sources in order to situate each competition within its historical context. The approach also involves the use of primary sources, competition briefs, institutional publications related to the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK), architectural documentation, as well as archival research, facilitated by institutions such as the Staatsbibliothek, Europeana, the Deutsche Digitale Bibliothek, and the Architekturmuseum TU Berlin. Additionally, secondary sources related to the Cold War, the cultural policy of socialism, as well as the reunification period, as described in the literature, (Fulbrook, 2005; Dennis, 2000; Betts, 2010) were also consulted.

Architectural and Spatial Analysis

The second level of methodology consists of a comparative architectural analysis between the two buildings of the library, Haus Unter den Linden, and Haus Potsdamer Straße. The sources for this level include design plans, accounts of the buildings' structure, competition designs, as well as the thoughts of the architects involved in the designs—including design documentation by Hans Scharoun (1964) and later architectural accounts by Edgar Wisniewski (1978, 1979). This stage focuses on how

architectural decisions translate political and institutional agendas into spatial form. This level involves tracing the attempts made by the architectural designs to overwrite the existing identities, mainly concerning the periods before and after German reunification.

Discourse and Symbolic Interpretation

The third aspect employs discourse analysis with a focus on the role of memory, cultural identity, and architectural symbolism. Important notions, such as lieux de mémoire (Nora, 1989), cultural memory (Assmann, 2011), the concept of urban palimpsests (Huysen, 2003), as well as the idea of Stadtbilder as symbolic imagery of the city (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2002) help decode cultural significance embedded in architectural forms. Studies related to architecture as representation (Vale, 1992) as well as representation in architecture (Forty, 2000) assist in analyzing the symbolic act of competition within the broader political history of Berlin. This helps to understand the role of Stabi as a dynamic process of cultural memory in the city. The sum of the insights therefore provides a comprehensive tool for the interpretation of the competition process in relation to Stabi as part of the dynamic process of cultural memory in the city. Taken together, these conceptual frameworks provide an interpretive lens through which the symbolic meanings of architectural interventions can be analyzed.

The integration of historical, architectural, and discursive evidence allows for methodological triangulation, thereby strengthening the interpretive validity of the findings.

The Three-Axis Analysis

In order to integrate the insights brought together through the historical, architectural, and discursive analyses, the research uses the following three-axis interpretive approach developed specifically for this study:

Political Context - placing each contest within its specific ideological, geopolitical, and administrative frameworks.

Architectural Strategy - analyzing the way in which architectural decision-making translates institutional-political agendas into spatial terms.

Symbolism – interpreting how architectural interventions communicate, inscribe, or resist cultural identity.

This structure enables the three competition periods, distinguished by the Cold War, reunification, and the digital age, to be analyzed comparatively, highlighting the divergences as well as the similarities in the development process of the Staatsbibliothek's identity.

Scope and Limitations

The research relies on documentary, archival, and published evidence rather than interviews or participant observation. This means that while there is no practitioner-based evidence, the study adopts a textually grounded approach that can be verified through historical records. Consequently, the analysis focuses primarily on interpretive and historical evidence rather than empirical fieldwork. The approach is interpretive rather than technical, seeking not to assess engineering performance or construction efficiency, but rather to explore the role of architectural competitions as instruments within broader cultural systems.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: HAUS UNTER DEN LINDEN (STABI EAST)

The Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Unter den Linden (Stabi East) reflects more than one hundred years of change in architecture, culture, and politics. Originally planned during the era of the Prussian Empire as the national library, with a monument-like status, this building's history is reflected in the ideologies and various shifts of all kinds, which have affected the urban landscape of the city of Berlin. The critical events in the history of Haus Unter den Linden and the transformations it went through are illustrated in the timeline presented below (Figure 2). The timeline enables an understanding of the political and architectural contexts against which the library has developed.

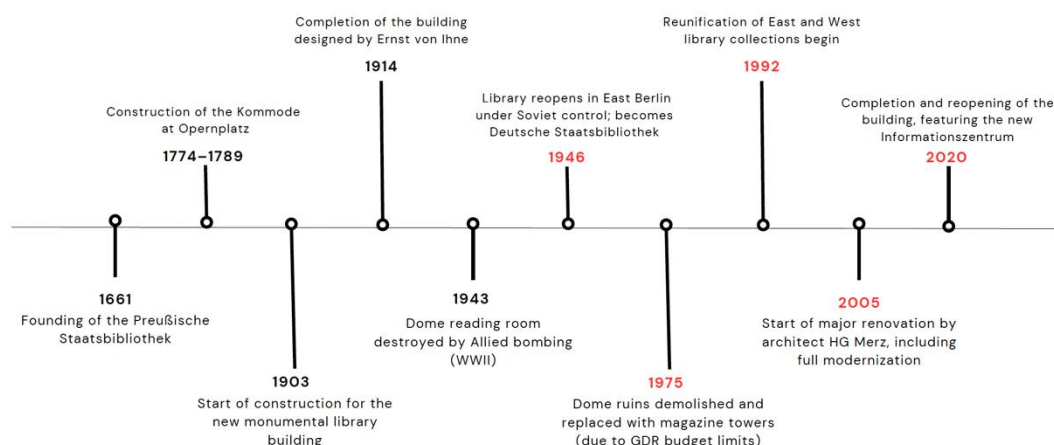


Figure 2. Major Historical Milestones of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Unter den Linden¹

POLITICAL CONTEXT

Imperial Ambitions and State Ideology

The ‘Kulturnation’ aim of Germany is an essential conceptual framework within which the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Unter den Linden’s (Stabi East’s) development must be contextualized (Lülfing, 2005, p.104-106; Zürn, 2018, p.52). Although the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Haus Unter den Linden’s (Stabi East’s) institutional history dates back to 1661, when Friedrich Wilhelm of Brandenburg founded the Electoral Library, the political conditions surrounding the construction of the library were fundamentally different.

In the late 1800s, Prussia’s emphasis on centralization and imperial expansion created the ideological conditions under which a purpose-built state library—conceived as an essential and symbolically charged institution—became imperative. The Kaiser’s assignment and the realization of architect Gustav Ernst von Ihne’s work between 1903 and 1914 were in the prevailing assumption that architecture functioned as an extension of government policy. The opening on March 22, 1914, represented Wilhelminian Germany’s goals and aspirations to be recognized as a Kulturnation (Lülfing 2005, 104-106; Zürn 2018, p.52).

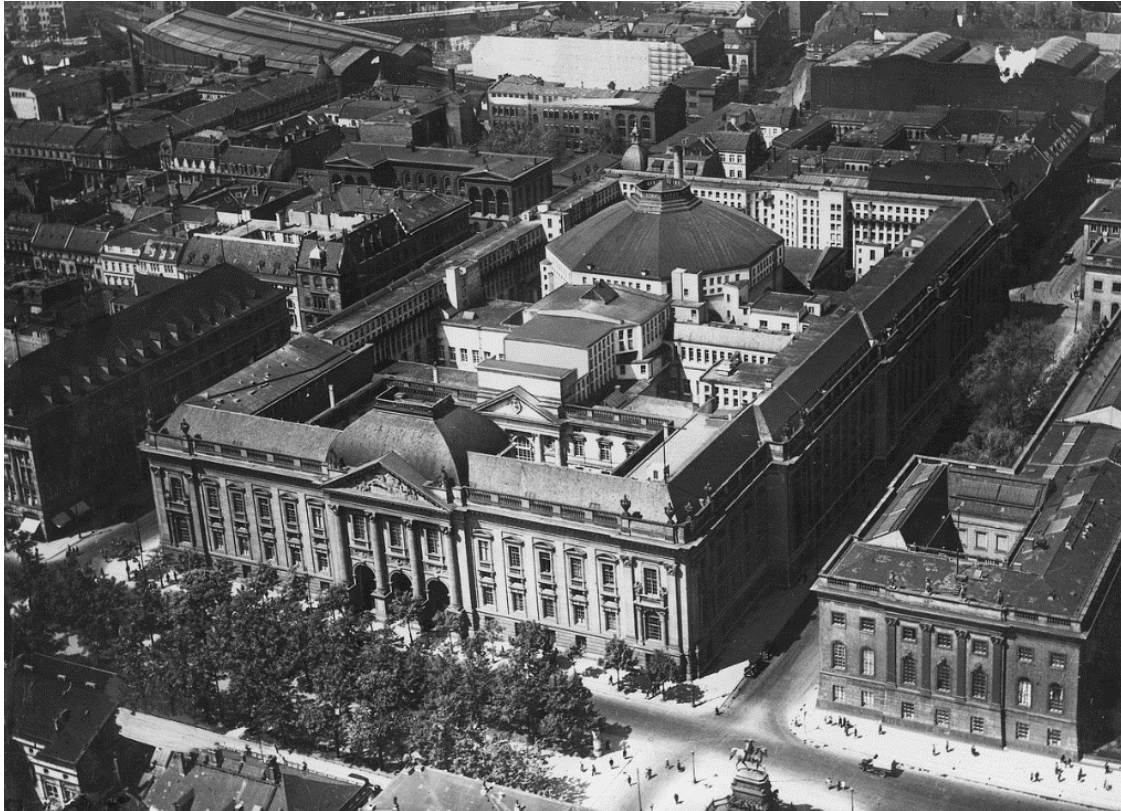


Figure 3. Stabi East, bpk-Bildagentur, (<https://www.bpk-bildagentur.de>).

War, Division, and Socialist Re-appropriation

The upheavals of the twentieth century brought about drastic changes in the meaning of this building. The air raids by the Allies in 1943 brought about extensive damage, including the collapse of the dome and reading hall. After the Second World War and the division of Berlin, it became part of the Soviet sector. It was reorganized in 1946 as the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, following the creation of the GDR.

Under the GDR, the role and symbolic meaning of the library were reframed in relation to the socialist style of governance. The library, no longer glorifying the imperial order, transformed into a research library with limited access, reflecting the aims of East Germany. This is evident in the general attitude toward architecture as expressed in the socialist style, focusing on efficiency and pragmatism and showing limited concern for heritage (Lülfing, 2005, p.110; Zürn, 2018, p. 86-89).

The cultural institutions in the East German Republic were organized as part of a centralized apparatus, which defined culture as “a tool of politics, used to shape socialist consciousness.” The cultural policy within the East German Republic, implemented through institutions such as the “Ministry of Culture” and the “Staatliche Kommission für Kunstangelegenheiten,” centered on ideological control, management, and the promotion of official discourse. The management of the cultural institutions, including the library, assumed responsibility for organizing collections according to socialist ideological frameworks, as well as restricting materials considered “problematic” from an ideological perspective. This defined the cultural institution as something non-autonomous, becoming part and parcel of the ideological management apparatus within the state’s machinery. In this manner, institutional transparency and spatial identity took a backseat to political expression, standardization, and efficiency. In the case of the Staatsbibliothek in East Berlin, this directly contributed to a spatial organization characterized by limited accessibility and its symbolic redeployment as an efficient repository rather than an ideological landmark (Fulbrook, 2005; Dennis, 2000; Betts, 2010).

Reunification and Institutional Reintegration

The fall of the wall in Berlin in 1989 and the reunification process the following year brought about a much-awaited change in the institutional setup. In 1992, the Deutsche Staatsbibliothek (East) and the Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz (West) were merged under the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. In the broader political context of reunification, the restoration of Haus Unter den Linden took on a national meaning. The role of cultural institutions was significant in demonstrating the removal of ideological demarcations, and the construction of the library assumed an almost symbolic significance within this context of cultural integration.

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

Imperial Design: Monumentality and Symmetry

The early twentieth-century design by Ernst von Ihne expressed a clear classical language of architecture, featuring monumentality through the façade, symmetry, and the dominating presence of the rooftop dome of the Kuppellesaal. The architecture expressed the politics of learning and statecraft, all of which were interconnected. The library was one of the most modern in Europe at the time of its opening (Zürn 2018, p.52).

G.D.R. Functionalism and the Magazine Towers

The socialist library types in the GDR were defined by the ideological requirement to emphasize the functional, standardized, and collectively accessible library as a form of library architecture, as opposed to those encapsulated in monumentalist architectural traditions. The library type was positioned as a “production site” of knowledge, as opposed to a signifier of cultural prestige, as the socialist notion of culture required this utility-oriented, and by the same token humility-driven, institutionalization. The socialist library type emerged as buildings featuring reinforced concrete architecture, modular architecture, and lack of ornamentation, as required by and reflecting the state’s emphasis on industrialized architecture as the mode of choice. In this type, functionality and efficiency were given greater consideration than monumentalist architecture, and this is visible through the addition of four “magazine towers” to Haus Unter den Linden in 1975, which appeared as silo-like buildings and dislocated the imperial symmetry of the original architecture as an expression of ideological “distancing” from aristocratic and bourgeois notions of cultural aesthetics (Hohlfeld, 1994; Wiesenmüller, 2008).

The architecture of the library under East German rule changed dramatically, and in 1975, four storage towers were constructed on the site of the destroyed dome. The towers evoked the appearance of utilitarian storage facilities, thereby disrupting the spatial coherence of Ihne’s original plan envisioned by architect Ihne, reflecting the philosophy of the East German aesthetic, namely functionality and the avoidance of imperial architecture. The four towers were the embodiment of this philosophy (Zürn 2018, p.86–89; Lülfig 2005, p.110).

The 1999 Competition and HG Merz’s Redevelopment Strategy

In the 1990s, the technological limitations and structural inconsistencies made the East Building appear antiquated compared to the West Berlin equivalent. In response, the Federal Building Authority and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) organized an international competition in 1999, which took into consideration both the preservation of history and the demands of today’s architecture. The scheme proposed by HG Merz Architekten, the winner of the competition, involved the placement of a glass structure on the site of the former dome, signifying the re-establishment of the building’s visual and symbolic center (Lülfig 2005, p.114–117).

Restoration and Architectural Reinterpretation

The two decades-long renovation process changed the building by introducing climate control systems, transport infrastructures, research facilities, and reading rooms. The installation of the newly interpreted dome in 2013 remained the most symbolic act in this process, as it was considered an ‘interpretation’ rather than a reconstruction, as it signified a rupture embedded in the building’s history, while revitalizing the ‘architectural essence’ (Zürn 2018, p.91).





Figure 4. Stabi East after Reinvention, (bpk-Bildagentur, <https://www.bpk-bildagentur.de>).

SYMBOLISM

Imperial Symbolism: Kultur, Power, and Identity

The original language of architecture expressed in the library's dome, axial symmetry, and monumentality conveyed the intellectual ambitions of Prussian nationalism. It conveyed the notion of cultural status entwined with state and scholarly authority (Zürn 2018, p.52).

Indeed, as Dolff-Bonekämper (Dolff-Bonekämper, 2002) argues, urban cultural heritage sites are "Stadtbilder", symbolic city images, through which societies historically negotiate meaning. The spatial transformation of the library designs reflects this process, whereby each redesign, competition, and reinterpretation represents a moment in which the city of Berlin expressed and negotiated various identities through spatial practices.

War Ruins and Socialist Pragmatism

The damage from wartime and the addition of storage towers by the GDR represented an ideological break. The emphasis on functional buildings and architecture and rather than monumentality represented the pragmatic approach by the socialist regime (Zürn 2018, p.86–89).

Reunification as Symbolic Repair

The institutional merge of 1992, the Restaurationswettbewerb of 1999, and the reinterpretation of the dome in 2013 formed, taken together, a gesture of restoration and reconciliation. These acknowledged the layered history of the building, while also recognizing it as part of a unified cultural landscape (Lülfing 2005, p.111–117; Zürn 2018, p. 91).

Stabi as Collective Memory

The nickname “Stabi” today reflects the library’s rootedness in the collective memory of Berlin. The reopening of the library in 2020, now used as a research library, marks the transformation of a site shaped by imperial ambition, war, and division into a publicly accessible intellectual institution.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: HAUS POTSDAMER STRABE (STABI WEST)

Although the East Berlin Staatsbibliothek’s origins date back to the royal dynasty of Prussia, the West Berlin library, Haus Potsdamer Straße, represents a response to the demands of the Cold War and the ideals of modernism. Built during a period of political division, its architecture and purpose were necessarily linked to the ideological and infrastructural requirements of the divided city. The most crucial turning points in the political, architectural, and institutional development of Haus Potsdamer Straße are encapsulated in the timeline below (see Figure 5). The timeline provides the framework within which the development of the library in both the divided and reunited city can be comprehended.

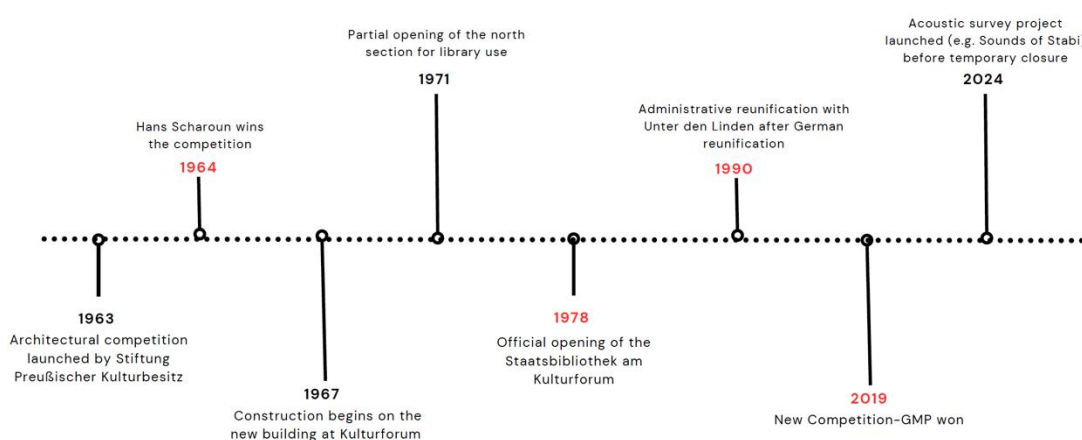


Figure 5. Major Historical Milestones of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin –Potsdamer Straße (Stabi West)

POLITICAL CONTEXT

From Division to Cultural Urgency

In 1961, the construction of the Berlin Wall cut off access to the Staatsbibliothek on Unter den Linden for residents of West Berlin, creating an immediate cultural break. Although the physical removal of the library did not occur immediately, the sense of cultural loss was immediate. The lack of a main research library constituted more than just a logistical issue; it represented West Berlin’s status as secondary in the ideological battle of the Cold War (Jørgensen 2019, p.6).

In reaction to this divide, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) held an invited architectural competition in 1963 for the construction of a national library as part of the proposed ‘Kulturforum’ close to Potsdamer Platz. The competition reflected both architectural and political concerns. The aim of the competition was to show that West Berlin was ‘a place of vibrant, transparent, and open culture,’ and therefore shared ideological roots with democracy, as opposed to the ‘overly centralized’ cultural infrastructure, as it was perceived, in East Germany (Sharon 2006, p.139-141). The issue, in other words, was never one of economic return, and it is clear that the question of the competition was which architecture was best able to express this West Berlin narrative.



Figure 6. Stabi West, (bpk-Bildagentur, <https://www.bpk-bildagentur.de>).

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

Hans Scharoun's Winning Vision

The competition-winning entry was produced by Hans Scharoun, the renowned exponent of German organic modernism and architect of the Berlin Philharmonie. Scharoun's entry contrasted the classical symmetry and axial planning characteristic of large buildings with his vision of a non-Euclidean spatial topology centered on the human experience, with fluid motion, differentiated levels, and an open floor plan designed to foster intellectual discourse. Indeed, as Jørgensen (2019, p.8) writes, the very purpose of this architecture was "to reject monumentality in favor of fluidity and light, making it an anti-monumentalist form of architecture."

The construction process began in 1967, but it was hampered by cost overruns and workflow issues. Following Scharoun's death in 1972, his collaborator, Edgar Wisniewski, supervised the construction process and sought to adhere closely to Scharoun's plan.

Post-Reunification Legacy and Renewal

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of the institution in 1992, Haus Potsdamer Straße remained an important research library. However, as the institution aged, the lack of full accessibility and outdated user facilities appeared increasingly incongruent with the building's historic value. In 2019, an architectural competition was launched by the SPK and the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning, this time not to establish a Cold War monument, as occurred in 1963, but to revitalize an existing one. The award-winning design by gmp (von Gerkan, Marg und Partner) introduced a new entry point at Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, optimized accessibility, and modernization while maintaining the spatial concepts originally developed conceptualized by Scharoun (Hansen-Goos

et al. 2024, p.4-6). This represented a general paradigm shift from ideological hostility to functional integration within the reunited and globalized Berlin of today.

SYMBOLISM

Architecture as Cold War Declaration

During the Cold War era, Haus Potsdamer Straße was more than just a library, as it represented a symbolically significant building type. Scharoun's philosophy of openness, fluidity, and motion expressed the democratic ideals of West Berlin. The architecture's spatial language directly opposed the monumentalist and centralized approaches to architecture characteristic of authoritarian regimes, thereby transforming the library into a form of cultural diplomacy.

Reconciliation and Institutional Transformation

Where, in the case of the East library, the emphasis of the 1999 design competition centered on reunification and reconciliation, the increasingly symbolic status of Stabi West evolved from Cold War 'counter-identity' to one of institutional partnership. It was henceforth incorporated into the Staatsbibliothek as part of an overarching institution.

Architectural Stewardship in the 2019 Competition

"The meaning of the 2019 competition is one of architectural stewardship rather than ideological conflict." The values of this competition, namely accessibility, sustainability, and the conservation of Scharoun's spatial contribution, expressed *"a broader understanding of architecture as something continuous through all political periods."* Another element reflecting this point of view is the 2024 acoustic research project *"Hinter den Geräuschkulissen,"* which recorded the acoustic identity of Scharoun's reading rooms, emphasizing that the cultural value of the building is not only visual but also acoustic (Hansen-Goos et al. 2024, p.10).

Stabi West as Collective Memory

In today's urban landscape, Haus Potsdamer Straße is the site of both architectural history and the living history of the divided and reunited city of Berlin. The building's transformation, from being a monument of the Cold War era to becoming a research institution within reunified Germany, exemplifies how architecture is both reflective and constitutive of urban identity in the modern city.

COMPETITION ANALYSIS: 1963 – 1999 – 2019

The political implications of architectural competitions in Berlin can be appreciated within the following general theoretical framework: architecture as an instrument of politics, in which buildings are often used as 'symbolic capital' in order to 'articulate ideology,' as Lawrence Vale so compellingly writes (1992), translating 'a regime's ideological program into architecture's symbolic language.' Also, as Adrian Forty writes, 'the meaning of architecture is ineluctably linked to politics' (2000). Taking into consideration the aforementioned views, it is clear that the architectural competitions of 1963, 1999, and 2019 are something more than just 'design processes,' they can also be understood as 'political acts.'

THE 1963 COMPETITION: STABI WEST

POLITICAL CONTEXT

According to Daum (1997), West Berlin had a unique urban identity within the context of the Cold War, and this took on significant dimensions through the use of culture as proof of modernization and democracy. The Haus Potsdamer Straße competition must be contextualized within this framework that sought to present West Berlin as an autonomous city.

The Berlin Wall, constructed in 1961, cut off West Berlin's links to the Staatsbibliothek on Unter den Linden, causing what Jørgensen sees as 'an immediate cultural break' (2019, p.6). Even if the destruction of the central library's role in the West took place over a series of years, the loss was sudden, and West Berlin no longer possessed a main research library. This is more than simply an administrative problem, as it represents an ideological marginalization of West Berlin in the Cold War order.

In reaction to this lack of cultural and political leadership, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) launched an architectural competition in 1963 to create a national library as part of the so-called Kulturforum being developed near Potsdamer Platz. According to Sharon (2006, p.139-141), the architecture competition was conceived both as an architectural task and as a political act. The competition was intended to show that West Berlin, in contrast to what was perceived as the centralized and controlled cultural order of the GDR, represented democracy and transparency, and, by extension, culture. The task set by the competition was not whether the library was economically viable, but which architectural language could best tell the West Berlin story.

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

The prize-winning entry by Hans Scharoun, the leading exponent of German organic modernism and architect of the Berlin Philharmonie, was revolutionary in departing from classical norms of symmetry and axiality. Scharoun's proposal represented a non-hierarchical, fluid architecture consisting of differentiated platforms and an internal landscape organized to stimulate motion, observation, and cognitive exchange. The architect's plan expressed the spatial rationality of his urban design, corresponding to the ideological ambitions of West Berlin.

According to Jørgensen (2019, p.8), "the plan rejected monumentality in favor of fluidity and light, and providing a contrasting model to the more rigid types of architecture, exemplified by axial and monumental designs." The construction of the Staatsbibliothek began in 1967, although it took longer due to cost overruns and other issues. After Scharoun's passing in 1972, his colleague, Edgar Wisniewski, took over the completion of the Staatsbibliothek project, attempting to remain faithful to the architect's original plan. The Haus Potsdamer Straße (Stabi West) finally opened in 1978 and became another cultural anchor for West Berlin, along with the Philharmonie.

SYMBOLISM

In the context of the Cold War, Haus Potsdamer Straße was much more than simply a library. The architectural language of the building, with its open circulation patterns, non-monumental volumes, and transparency, expressed the spatial manifestation of democracy. In this respect, the Scharoun library can indeed be described as an instrument of cultural diplomacy, representing an architectural gesture of non-monumentalization and decentralization, as opposed to the monumentality and centrality characteristic of non-democratic regimes. The library, as mentioned, acted as a political and ideological signifier, projecting the politics of the West through architecture.

THE 1999 COMPETITION: STABI EAST POLITICAL CONTEXT

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the merging of the East and West libraries in 1992 (Lülfing, 2005, p.111) changed the cultural landscape of the reunited city. The Haus Unter den Linden, with the architectural traces from the imperial era of Prussia as well as transformations carried out during the GDR, received significant attention as part of the national process of cultural reunions. The call to modernize and refurbish the building, reflecting the ambitions of the reunited city, contributed to the initiation of the international architectural competition in 1999.

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

The East building remained less developed than the West Berlin equivalent by the 1990s. The competition launched by the Federal Building Authority and SPK in 1999 called for proposals that combined historical preservation with contemporary needs. The HG Merz Architekten plan, which won the competition, proposed adding a modern glass cube at the site of the old dome, re-establishing the building's visual center (Lülfing 2005, p.114-117).

SYMBOLISM

The construction of the new dome, finished in 2013, is without question the most symbolic act of this process in terms of architecture. Importantly, this act was neither a reproduction nor a reconstruction, but merely an "interpretation" of the original monument, reflecting both the break with tradition and the deliberate engagement with the monument's "multi-layered past" (Zürn 2018, p.91). On this level, the

1999 competition signified a process of reconciliation—the imperial past, the GDR modifications, and German cultural identity as well.

THE 2019 COMPETITION: STABI WEST POLITICAL CONTEXT

After decades of intensive use, Haus Potsdamer Straße required substantial modernization due to structural aging, accessibility limitations, and outdated technical infrastructure. In contrast to the ideological assertion of the 1963 competition, the latest competition in 2019 reflected the priorities of a globalized and reunited Berlin, namely inclusivity, sustainability, accessibility, and institutional continuity (Hansen-Goos et al. 2024, p. 4-6). The SPK and the Federal Office for Building and Regional Planning therefore launched an architecture competition with the goal of conserving and modernizing an existing cultural monument, not creating a new symbolic marker, but maintaining an existing one.

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY

The competition was won by gmp (von Gerkan, Marg und Partner), whose proposal introduced a new entrance at Marlene-Dietrich-Platz, improved accessibility, and integrated contemporary infrastructure into Scharoun’s original spatial structure.



Figure 7. Winning Proposal by gmp – von Gerkan, Marg und Partner, (competition rendering.2019),

SYMBOLISM

The 2019 competition represented a conceptual shift from ideological representation to architectural curatorial practice. As Hansen-Goos et al. (2024, p.10) note, “already the acoustic research ‘Hinter den Geräuschkulissen’ conducted in 2024, which recorded the acoustic qualities of Scharoun’s reading rooms, reflects this trend towards recognizing cultural value in multisensory and non-visual terms.” In this manner, the symbolic meaning of Stabi West changed from a Cold-War era notion of identity politics to one of maintaining cultural and architectural integration into the unified city.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: THREE COMPETITIONS, ONE EVOLVING INSTITUTION

The three architectural competitions in 1963, 1999, and 2019 provide the framework for understanding the narrative process, which also reflects the transformation process in Berlin as well. Although the architectural competitions in 1963, 1999, and 2019 occurred in different contexts, namely the eras of division, reunification, and globalization, they provide insights into how architecture is redefined as a consequence of the ever-changing political context. The process of comparison, organized through the

three axes, provides insights into various patterns that have defined the development process of the Staatsbibliothek.

POLITICAL CONTEXT: FROM IDEOLOGICAL DIVISION TO NATIONAL REINTEGRATION AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTINUITY

The event of 1963 must be interpreted as a reaction to the symbolic and functional rupture triggered by the erection of the Berlin Wall. The sudden loss of access to the Staatsbibliothek on Unter den Linden represented a cultural void, which was intended to be filled by the library constructed on the Kulturforum. The political implications were thereby clear: the project represented the spatial manifestation of democracy’s strength in the face of ideological conflict.

On the other hand, the competition organized in 1999 took place in response to new political priorities, with national cohesion being at the core of those priorities. After the reunification of Germany in 1990 and the merging of the East and West library systems in 1992 (Lülfing, 2005, p. 111), architectural projects assumed a reconciliatory role. The Unter den Linden House was no longer merely an infrastructure scheme but, above all, a critical site through which the nation, as a whole, reconsidered its relationship with imperial legacies, socialist transformations, and cultural demands.

The 2019 competition, on the other hand, represents the political and institutional agenda of a mature, reunited Berlin. Instead of ideological projection or the healing of reunification-era divisions, the emphasis was on modernization, accessibility, and sustainability. In this case, as Hansen-Goos et al. (2024, p.4-6) argue, this competition expressed the interests of a global city, whose cultural institutions need to be functional and publicly oriented.

Throughout all of these competitions, the political role of architecture shifted from assertion to reconciliation, and ultimately to preservation, reflecting the same process in the development of urban identity in Berlin.

Table 1. Historical Context and Political Imperatives

Aspect	1963–64 (West)	1999–2000 (East)	2019–ongoing (West)
Historical Moment	Cold War, divided Berlin	Post-reunification Germany	Unified Berlin in the 21st century
Institutional Goal	Cultural declaration of West Berlin	Integration & modernization of East	Preservation & access in a digital era
Political Message	Symbol of democracy and openness	Reclaiming national identity	Adapting heritage to contemporary society

ARCHITECTURAL STRATEGY: FROM ORGANIC MODERNISM TO HYBRID RECONSTRUCTION AND ADAPTIVE RENEWAL

The approaches to architecture developed in these competitions also reflect the shifts in cultural and functional values. The Haus Potsdamer Straße, designed by Hans Scharoun in 1963, expressed an anti-monumentalist modernism and emphasized fluidity, differentiated levels, and open circulation, reflecting both the ideological and spatial responses to the cultural void created by the division.

The task changed dramatically by 1999. The objective was no longer to create a symbol of democratic counter-identity, but to restore and reinterpret the historical structure while integrating contemporary infrastructure into the historically charged building. The HG Merz plan achieved this by combining modernization with careful restoration, using the glass cube to reestablish the symbolic center of the Ihne plan and to correlate modern infrastructure within this plan (Lülfing 2005, p. 114-117). The meaning-driven character of the new dome (91 Zürn 2018) illustrates this process.



The 2019 competition represented the continuation of this trend and entered a new phase of architectural stewardship. The gmp architecture company’s project retained the formal logic of Scharoun and responded to contemporary demand for accessibility, information, and communication. The task did not aim at creating a new icon but sought to preserve an existing one, incorporating today’s functions into the existing spatial order.

Hence, within the three competitions, the strategy of architecture progresses from radical innovation to integrative reconstruction and finally to sensitive renewal, depicting an increasing emphasis on both remembrance and adaptation.

Table 2. Architectural Strategies and Values

Category	1963–64	1999–2000	2019–ongoing
Type of Competition	Invited (national)	Open (international)	Open (international)
Winning Architects	Hans Scharoun	HG Merz	gmp (von Gerkan, Marg und Partner)
Architectural Values	Organic modernism, human-centered space	Respectful modernization, transparency	Technological upgrade, gentle intervention
Key Features	Non-linear reading rooms, symbolic spatial logic	Glass cube (Informationszentrum), restored dome	Transparent entrance, improved infrastructure
Symbolic Effect	Reinforced West’s cultural leadership	Reinvented East’s historical center	Continued legacy in a unified system

SYMBOLISM: FROM DEMOCRATIC DECLARATION TO CULTURAL RECONCILIATION AND ARCHITECTURAL STEWARDSHIP

Symbolically, each competition defines a different cultural role for Stabi. The 1963 competition used architecture as an ideological instrument. Scharoun’s emphasis on openness, transparency, and fluidity represented democratic ideals in spatial form, operating as an architectural counter-narrative to the authoritarian monumentalism attributed to the East.

The 1999 competition shifted symbolic emphasis toward cultural reconciliation and memory reconstruction. The reinterpretation of the dome—neither a replica nor an erasure—expressed a desire to engage critically with the building’s imperial and socialist layers, weaving them into a unified national identity. Architecture here became a means of cultural repair.

The 2019 competition introduced a new symbolic framework: that of stewardship. As demonstrated by the 2024 acoustic study “Hinter den Geräuschkulissen” (Hansen-Goos et al. 2024, p.10), the building’s cultural value is now understood not only visually but also acoustically and experientially. Symbolism has thus shifted from ideological confrontation to a nuanced appreciation of the building’s multisensory heritage.

Taken together, the symbolic trajectory moves from identity assertion - historical reconciliation - cultural caretaking, mapping an evolution in the meanings assigned to architectural interventions within the Staatsbibliothek. These transformations also reflect the broader demographic and sociocultural changes experienced by Berlin after the Cold War and reunification. As the city evolved from a divided metropolis into a global urban center, the Staatsbibliothek gradually transformed from two separate ideological institutions into a unified cultural infrastructure. In this context, architectural competitions acted as mediating mechanisms through which institutional memory and urban transformation intersected.



Table 3. Ideological Reflections and Institutional Impact

Theme	1963–64	1999–2000	2019–ongoing
Role of Architecture	Civic propaganda	Cultural healing	Institutional continuity
Visibility of Ideology	Explicit: Cold War showcase	Implicit: Reunification symbol	Subtle: Heritage management
Institutional Shift	Built cultural identity	Reintegrated a fragmented legacy	Future-proofed a legacy system

DISCUSSION: ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN IDENTITY, MEMORY AND POLITICS

In this section, the implications of this research are interpreted in relation to broader issues concerning architecture, memory, and identity.

The analysis of the three architectural competitions indicates that the transformation of the Staatsbibliothek cannot be understood solely as a process of architectural modernization. Instead, the three architecture competitions function as cultural, political, and symbolic interventions, and they reflect the changing ideological and institutional context of Berlin's history. The first architecture competition, which took place in 1963, expressed the democratic ambitions of West Berlin during the Cold War era, while the architecture competition of 1999 contextualized the imperial past of Haus Unter den Linden within the framework of national identity.

According to Jan Assmann, cultural memory is sustained by institutions, which provide meaning within and between generations (Assmann, 2011). Within this context, the Staatsbibliothek, in both East and West Berlin, was more than merely a repository of knowledge, it operated as an institutional actor through which political narratives and cultural identities were articulated and preserved. The architecture competitions of 1963, 1999, and 2019 can thereby be understood as critical moments in which the cultural memory of the institution was negotiated, reinterpreted, and recontextualized.

The layered history of Staatsbibliothek architecture can be interpreted within the framework of memory studies. Pierre Nora's 'lieux de mémoire' (Nora, 1989) defines cultural spaces as repositories of meaning, which are 'created or negotiated through periods of disremembering and rememory.' Another relevant theory is Aleida Assmann's 'cultural memory' (2011) and the role of 'institutions as storage sites of identity.' Within this theoretical framework, the Staatsbibliothek can be understood as a spatial archive of Berlin's political transformations, divided and later reconnected through the historical processes of the Cold War and reunification. The competitions examined in this study therefore illustrate how architectural interventions can operate as mechanisms for reinterpreting the political past while shaping new institutional meanings.

The analysis of the three architecture competitions, carried out in 1963, 1999, and 2019, indicates that Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin is much more than simply an institutional store of knowledge. Rather, it has functioned as an architectural and institutional platform through which Berlin has negotiated questions of identity, memory, and political transformation. In this sense, architecture becomes a practice of representation in which spatial form reflects ideological positions, marks historical discontinuities, and facilitates processes of cultural reconciliation.

The case of the 1963 Staatsbibliothek competition illustrates how architecture functions as a tool for ideological demarcation through spatial practices in a divided city. In response to the loss of the original Staatsbibliothek, no longer easily accessible following the construction of the Berlin Wall, the West Berlin Staatsbibliothek competition both addressed an immediate infrastructural need and carried significant symbolic meaning. Scharoun's organic modernist architecture, characterized by openness,

transparency, and fluid spatial organization, translated democratic ideals into architectural form. In this sense, the building functioned not only as a research library but also as a spatial representation of the political values that West Berlin sought to project during the Cold War.

In contrast, the 1999 edition emerged within the historical framework of national reunification. The reunited German nation was confronted with the challenge of addressing a building driven by imperial ambition, wartime destruction, and socialist adaptation. Architectural transformation, hence, had to navigate multiple historical layers embedded in the structure. The strategy of reinterpreting, rather than reproducing, the dome signaled a broader cultural shift. Instead of restoring the past through nostalgic reconstruction, the project acknowledged historical rupture while integrating the building into the cultural narrative of a reunited Berlin.

The 2019 competition is characteristic of yet another transformation in the symbolic meaning of architecture. There is no ideological conflict or national consolidation here, and the competition is centered on the modernization of infrastructure, accessibility, sustainability, and the preservation of Scharoun's architectural legacy. The emphasis on acoustic research and sensory heritage (Hansen-Goos et al. 2024, p.10) reflects a contemporary understanding of cultural value that extends beyond visual representation. Architecture in this context operates as a form of institutional stewardship concerned with maintaining and adapting architectural heritage within evolving urban and cultural conditions.

Together, the competitive projects track a course from political statement, through cultural reconciliation, to institutional stewardship. This progression illustrates how the symbolic meaning of architecture evolves in response to shifting political and cultural contexts. The Staatsbibliothek can therefore be understood as an architectural palimpsest in which successive interventions layer new meanings onto existing historical structures.

Beyond their architectural outcomes, the competitions also contributed to the gradual formation of the Staatsbibliothek's institutional identity within the changing social fabric of Berlin. As the city moved from a divided Cold War metropolis to a reunited and increasingly global urban center, the role of the library shifted accordingly. In this process, architectural competitions functioned as institutional turning points through which the library redefined its public role, accessibility, and cultural relevance. The transformation of Stabi from two ideologically separated libraries into a unified national research institution reflects not only architectural change but also the broader demographic and sociocultural transformation of Berlin after reunification. In this sense, architectural competitions can be understood as mechanisms through which institutional memory is spatially negotiated within the evolving urban society.

In addition, the research shows that architectural competitions in Berlin function as forms of cultural storytelling. Rather than serving only as technical procedures for selecting design proposals, they also operate as processes through which institutional identities are articulated and negotiated within the urban landscape. Each competition redefined the role of the Staatsbibliothek within Berlin's cultural narrative, linking architectural transformation with broader processes of political change and collective memory. In this sense, the evolution of Stabi from a divided institution into a unified national library illustrates how architecture can mediate between historical memory and future urban identity. The Staatsbibliothek thus emerges as a dynamic cultural institution embedded within the ongoing negotiation between Berlin's past and its evolving urban future.

CONCLUSION

The three architectural competitions held in 1963, 1999, and 2019 illustrate that the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin is more than just a cultural organization affected by architectural endeavors, but rather a dynamic location where the politics, memory, and identity of the city of Berlin are continually renegotiated. Each of the three architectural competitions represented the spirit of its time, ranging from Cold War ideological struggle and post-reunification cultural reconstruction to contemporary priorities of modernization and institutional continuity.

The competition in 1963 was involved in a transformation of architecture as a spatially defined assertion of democratic identity, as West Berlin sought cultural recognition in the face of political isolation. In a different historical context, the competition in 1999 addressed the imperial and socialist layers of Haus Unter den Linden, reframing them within the cultural and institutional framework of reunified Germany. The competition in 2019, by contrast, reflected the priorities of a mature cultural institution operating within a globalized urban environment, emphasizing accessibility, sustainability, and the careful stewardship of Scharoun's architectural heritage.

In this way, the Staatsbibliothek has embodied different symbolic meanings across these three historical periods, ranging from ideological differentiation to cultural reconciliation and institutional continuity. These symbolic meanings are inscribed in the Staatsbibliothek's buildings, Haus Unter den Linden and Haus Potsdamer Straße, which function as architectural palimpsests where successive interventions layer new interpretations onto the historical fabric of the city.

Furthermore, this particular case study illustrates architectural competitions in Berlin function not only as procedural design mechanisms but also as cultural and political instruments through which institutional identity is articulated and renegotiated. Each competition has redefined the role of the library in the cultural topography of the city, mediating between historical memory and future-oriented institutional development. Architecture, therefore, acts as a tool of remembrance, transformation, as well as cultural production. The broader implications of this research also make clear the relationship between the architectural representation of the historically divided or post-conflict city, and the representation of history, as has long been explored in scholarship, for example in the work of Ladd (1997) and Koshar (2000). More broadly, the findings suggest that architectural competitions can function as institutional mechanisms through which cities reinterpret their political past while shaping new cultural identities.

Finally, therefore, the transformation of the Staatsbibliothek, from a fractional collection to a merged national collection, and then to a modern research library, has made clear the importance of architecture in the creation of the cultural identity of Berlin. The architectural competitions examined in this study demonstrate that such institutional transformations do not occur only through administrative decisions but also through spatial and symbolic interventions. In this sense, competitions act as catalysts through which institutional identity and urban memory are continuously reconstructed. The Staatsbibliothek today pursues an active role in this process, in which political history, cultural memory, architecture, and visions of the future are necessarily in ongoing dialogue. In this sense, the competitions discussed in this study illustrate how architectural processes contribute not only to spatial transformation but also to the reconstruction of institutional identity within changing urban societies.

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